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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000675

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES ELECTION PREPARATIONS WITH
USFP, ISTIQLAL, AND UMP LEADERS

Classified By: AMB Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: With Morocco's next legislative election fast approaching, the Ambassador called on leaders of the three largest parties in the ruling coalition to discuss preparations for September's ballot as well party plans to increase voter participation, particularly among youth. All three party leaders outlined programs based on combating unemployment, increasing investment, and boosting the efficiency of social services. We were struck by the undercurrents of complacency, entitlement, and lack of urgency among these aging party leaders. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In the course of a round of calls on key political party leaders, the Ambassador met April 3 with Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) party leader and Minister of Territorial Development, Water, and Environment Mohamed El Yazghi. He saw April 4 Istiqlal party leader and Minister of State Abbas El Fassi. On April 11, he met with Popular Movement Union (UMP) president Mahjoubi Aherdane and Minister of Agriculture and UMP secretary general Mohand Laenser. This round of calls, building on similar discussions last year with leading political party figures, is part of the Mission's elections plan. Other meetings will be reported septel.

Election Platforms, In Development

¶3. (C) Commenting on his party's preparations, USFP Secretary General Mohamed El Yazghi noted that several

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sub-committees are in the process of preparing the USFP's national campaign platform. El Yazghi previewed key themes of the strategy as combating unemployment, increasing investment, and improving the efficiency of social services, including in the water sector. El Yazghi stressed the USFP's stepped up efforts to engage youth, including actively seeking out and integrating youth ideas in to the party's electoral strategy. Profiting from the Internet, the USFP has called for campaign suggestions on the party's website and members of the party's executive bureau have held live web chat sessions in an attempt to attract youth.

¶4. (C) Similarly, Istiqlal Secretary General Abbas El Fassi said his party has initiated several working groups to develop a comprehensive campaign strategy. El Fassi noted his intensified personal outreach efforts, including visits to rural Istiqlal branch offices each weekend, intended to reinforce Istiqlal's image among potential voters. He revealed that Istiqlal has begun an internal candidate

selection process for the upcoming election, based on a point system that incorporates a range of categories; responsibility within the party, length of time as a member, age, and external party activities. The new method has been well received by Istiqlal candidates and highlights the (nascent) internal democracy of the party, he stressed.

15. (C) For their part, UMP leaders said the party's election plan will focus on rural development, among other issues. UMP secretary general Laenser noted the necessity of working quickly to have a meaningful impact on Election Day. Stressing the tribal roots of Moroccan society, party president Aherdane confirmed that the party has its sights on gaining seats in urban districts, while maintaining its rural base. The largest challenge for the UMP will be message exposure, explained Laenser, because its supporters heavily rely on oral communication to spread information.

USFP's Successful Rose Festival Reaches Out To Youth -----

16. (C) El Yazghi described the USFP-organized Spring Rose Festival, held in Casablanca March 30 and April 1, as an overwhelming and "unimaginable" success, particularly in terms of youth participation. Unlike past events that did not resonate well among youth, this year's festival (the first of its kind for the USFP) included various musical performances and a pavilion showcasing cultural and political aspects specific to Morocco's 16 regions. El Yazghi claimed the two-day festival attracted over 200,000 attendees, mostly youth. (NB: Press reports over 100,000 attended the festival, featuring Morocco's top hip-hop and rock-fusion musicians.)

Lack Of Urgency Apparent In Leaders -----

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17. (C) USFP leader Yazghi emphasized the importance of large voter turnout at September's election and expressed hoped that overall participation would reach at least sixty percent. (Note: According to the Ministry of Interior, voter turnout in the 2002 legislative election was at 52 percent. End Note.) El Yazghi, however, believed the party's positive performance within government during the past five years will secure a large number of votes for the USFP in the next election.

18. (C) Despite a history of tainted elections, Istiqlal leader Fassi noted the party's confidence in the King's efforts to ensure transparent and legitimate elections. (NB: In late 2006, El Fassi protested selective prosecution of Istiqlal members for vote buying in the upper house elections, when members of the Justice Minister's USFP escaped punishment.) He maintained that this year's election would surpass 2002 as the freest and fairest elections on record in Morocco. Istiqlal, blessed with an unwavering base support structure, has the largest presence in Morocco, covering 1300 out of Morocco's 1500 communes, according to El Fassi. Istiqlal's election rhetoric, like in previous campaigns, targets voters who have historically associated themselves with the party's nationalist line; it takes no fresh approaches.

19. (C) UMP president Laenser does not predict, based on party studies, a large power shift within Moroccan politics following September's ballot. Laenser added that the current ruling government majority is stable and has coalesced around centrist policies derived by consensus, noting that the bulk of Morocco's privatization has occurred under a socialist-affiliated minister. The UMP does not envision any problems continuing its relationship with the current government, said Laenser

Potential PJD Coalition: USFP Denial, But UMP Open -----

¶10. (C) Turning to potential USFP coalition partners, El Yazghi vehemently denied rumors that the USFP has considered an alliance with the Islamist Party for Justice and Development (PJD). (Note: PJD Executive Bureau member and parliamentarian Lachen Daoudi was quoted March 26 in local press as saying, "We are ready to govern with the USFP." End Note.) Yazghi countered, "they have attacked us for years and say we are corrupt, why would we join forces with them?" The PJD claim of an alliance is propaganda and a political tactic that reveals the "double language" nature of the party, said El Yazghi.

¶11. (C) The UMP leadership, on the other hand, did not rule out an alliance with the PJD, "should the situation present itself." Recalling the history between the UMP and PJD, Laenser said the two parties maintain friendly contact. (Note: The Constitutional and Democratic Popular Movement (MPDC) party, from which the PJD was born, was founded by former members of Popular Movement party. End Note.) Aherdane stressed that the PJD's rhetoric has evolved and the party should not be judged by its past, but by its current reality. Aherdane supported any alliance that would bring the PJD into the government, noting this would effectively limit extremism within that party.

Western Sahara

¶12. (C) Touching briefly on the Western Sahara, El Fassi expressed optimism that a solution would be found to the Western Sahara conflict. He applauded recent diplomatic efforts undertaken by the King to garner support for Morocco's autonomy plan, and hoped that all parties would reach a negotiated solution. Noting Istiqlal's long history of activity in the territory, El Fassi said that the Western Sahara of today is very different than the past, underscoring a new generation has grown up under only a Moroccan presence.

¶13. (C) UMP leaders also believed important progress has been made on the Western Sahara. They, however, stressed that decisions on the Sahara will also have repercussions in other regions of Morocco. Similarly, Aherdane opined that Algeria does not support autonomy in part because of the domestic consequences it would have in some regions of Algerian. Aherdane stressed that Morocco has heavily invested in the territory diplomatically, economically, and emotionally, and can not afford "to lose it."

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Supportive of USG-Sponsored Training

¶14. (C) On USG-funded democracy and governance activities, El Yazghi and El Fassi commended the work the Mission has provided, particularly through the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute. El Yazghi underscored that USFP was one of the first parties to actively support the work of the institutes in Morocco, and continues to welcome their activities because they help foster positive change.

Comment

¶15. (C) We were struck by the undercurrents of complacency and entitlement in the remarks made by the leadership of Morocco's three largest parties in the ruling majority, particularly El Fassi. They conveyed no sense of urgency either towards their parties' campaigns or towards pressing, potentially explosive domestic issues such as unemployment. Interestingly, USFP and Istiqlal party leaders appeared removed from the most pressing issues at the time of the meetings; the transportation strike, which highlighted the difficulties many Moroccans face meeting basic needs, as well

as the Ministry of Interior's opening on April 5 of the election voter rolls for updating. At least the USFP is giving some scope to its younger members, as shown by its successful festival. Nevertheless, we believe these parties will have to work overtime in order to avoid losing ground to the Islamist PJD in the September election. End Comment.

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